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GENEALOGICAL USE OF CATHOLIC RECORDS IN NORTH AMERICA

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Not long ago a lady living in a western state requested information concerning her grandparents who came from County Galway in Ireland. After a sojourn in Cincinnati, they settled near Tipton, Indiana, about 1856. The lady first wrote to the Notre Dame archives without success. Next, she sent an inquiry to Vincennes. As often happens, the librarian referred her to me as the archivist of the archdiocese of Indianapolis.

The lady's adventures illustrate the wrong way to make genealogical use of Catholic records. The records most useful to genealogists are generally not in large depositories or even in diocesan archives, but in the registers of parish churches. The lady's best bet would be to write to the parish priest at Tipton. She could obtain his address from the *Official Catholic Directory,* a huge volume issued every year. The directory gives the addresses, diocese by diocese, of all the Catholic churches in the United States as well as an alphabetical list of all priests. It is a valuable instrument for beginning any search of Catholic records.

Where could the lady find a copy of the *Directory?* Not in every rectory, of course, for it costs about $40.00. But, the chancery of every diocese has recent issues. Some public libraries have recent and even older volumes, and such a collection is of great help to those seeking intelligence concerning their Catholic forefathers. The *Directory* of a given year, say 1845 or 1869, shows the reader which dioceses and which parishes existed at that time.

Not long ago I received an inquiry about the baptismal record of a person purportedly born in Cincinnati. The *Directory* for 1850, the supposed birth year, shows which parishes were then in Cincinnati. Perhaps half a dozen existed rather than the many now active. The inquiry needs only be addressed to these few.

The archives of the Indianapolis archdiocese contain a collection of the *Directory* reaching back to the 19th century with only a few gaps. I understand that there is a complete set, beginning before the middle of the

last century, in the Notre Dame archives. On the other hand, the Notre Dame archives have only a few copies of parish records which would be of help in the direct tracing of one's ancestors.

Much the same is true of other large depositories, such as Saint Louis University or The Catholic University. These archives are concerned with larger movements in the Church rather than with parish affairs. Of course, if one's ancestors, direct or collateral, clerical or lay, were prominent in Catholic affairs, or if they were students or teachers at one of these colleges, one might well learn something about them in the institution's archives.

The Code of Canon Law directs that copies of all parish books be sent to the diocesan chancery at the end of each year. If this direction were carried out, the chancellor or the archivist of the diocese would have at hand all records that the parish priest has to help the genealogist. In actual fact, however, only a few dioceses have put this direction into practice.

In recent years many bishops have had all parish books microfilmed, but it is for purposes of security rather than for the convenience of genealogists or historians. They want the records available for ecclesiastical purposes in case fire, flood or thieves destroy the parish books. For this reason, the microfilm is stored in bank vaults or other safe places and cannot be consulted by archivists, historians and genealogists. Surely the yearly transmission of copies of books would give more security than microfilming every decade or so, since destruction can occur within the decade. At any rate, the canon is still in the Code of Canon Law and the bishops can invoke it whenever they have an impulse to contribute to historical or genealogical research.

While most diocesan archives don't have copies of parish records, one has recourse to the chancellor or the archivist of the diocese to learn which parish is most likely to have the information he seeks. By canon law the chancellor is the official custodian of the diocesan archives. In this country, however, the chancellor is so intimately and actively engaged in the government of the diocese that he has little time for concern with the past. Many bishops appoint archivists to deal with what is called the dead past.

Cardinal Ritter was one of the first to show interest in historical matters when as bishop of Indianapolis, he appointed Father Robert Gorman archivist more than forty years ago. Not many bishops have followed this example. The *Catholic Directory* names only a few archivists among the diocesan officers. The revision of the Code of Canon Law now in process may include archivists among the officials of the diocese.

If you are seeking information about a priest, the chancellor or the archivist is the most likely source. Frequently requests come to me concerning a priest who was the great-uncle of persons living in distant places. Just this week I had a visit from a native of Dublin, acting in behalf of relatives in Ireland. They wished to learn about a granduncle who served at Saint John's church and died here the year I was born. I was happy to supply the information and in return learned something of value to the history of the archdiocese. The careers of the priests serving in the archdiocese are on record here, but often we know little about their early life. Relatives can often fill this gap in our information.

Inquiries about lay persons may well be directed to the archivist, if no copy of the *Catholic Directory* is available. Even with the *Directory,* one may not know precisely where his ancestor lived, and the diocesan archivist might be able to give him direction concerning the development of the parishes.

The lady from the western state was helped in this manner. The area where her grandparents lived passed into the Fort Wayne diocese about the time they arrived there and later became part of the diocese of Lafayette. I sent a copy of the lady's letter to Father Anthony Prosen, the Archivist at Lafayette, and he put her in touch with hitherto unknown cousins. There is hope that she will learn much from them.

Throughout the period of French rule over Canada and Louisiana this area was within the diocese of Quebec, founded in 1674. Father Pierre Gibault was a priest of the diocese. He was sent by Bishop John Olivier Briand with the power of a vicar general. In 1789, the year the present government of the United States began, Pope Pius VI detached from Quebec all the territory

of the new nation and made it the diocese of Baltimore, appointing John Carroll to be its first bishop. Then in 1808 Pope Pius VII raised Baltimore to an archdiocese and created four new dioceses: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Bardstown.

Bardstown was then, as now, a little town in Kentucky, which didn't even have a church that could be declared a cathedral. But the bishop, Benedict Joseph Flaget, held jurisdiction over Kentucky and Tennessee and all that had been the Northwest Territory. In 1814, Indiana received its first visit from a bishop when Flaget came to Vincennes. He had been there 20 years before when he served his first parish. It was a joyous reunion. Genealogists may find it interesting that he wrote to his brother in France that he recognized not only his old parishioners but their children as well from their resemblance to their parents. This was the first time confirmation was administered in Indiana, and several hundred adults and children received the sacrament.

Twenty years later Indiana received a bishop of its own, the first bishop of Vincennes, Simon Gabriel Brute. Sixty-four years later the diocese became the diocese of Indianapolis. Over the years it has become smaller in area as new dioceses have been detached from it. First the diocese of Chicago was erected; then Fort Wayne. Finally, with the creation of the diocese of Evansville, even the city of Vincennes, its original seat, was lost. But the diocese that Bishop Brute presided over is the one of which George Biskup is the archbishop.

This bit of history shows the importance the *Official Catholic Directory* has for the genealogist in tracing the changes in church government over the years. One must follow this development to learn which parishes have the records of the lives of our ancestors.

What then are these records? The Code of Canon Law enumerates five books that every parish priest is obliged to keep. *To keep* has the double meaning of recording entries and of preserving them from loss. Further, the records must be secure against tampering or alteration. The records are the books of baptisms, of marriages, of confirmations, of the deceased, and of the condition of souls. These books haven't a long history. For only

400 years have parish priests had the duty of keeping books. While there is evidence of some local regulations as early as the 13th century, it was the Council of Trent [1545-1563] that enacted a law requiring records for the entire Church.

For centuries the Church had forbidden clandestine or secret marriages, obliging all who entered marriage to do so in the presence of the parish priest. Those who married by simply exchanging consent with each other defied the law of the Church and were adjudged sinners. Nevertheless, their marriages were valid and binding. The failure to declare secret marriages invalid was the source of abuses: Couples who tired of their union argued that they were not really married, and hence should be permitted to enter new unions, which would be real marriages. By decree of the Council of Trent, no marriage would be valid that was not entered into in the presence of the parish priest and two or three witnesses. To enforce this decree the Council ordered that each parish priest keep a record of every marriage at which he assisted with the names of the bride and groom and of the witnesses.

The Council also decreed that parish priests keep a record of baptisms. This law grew out of concern for the sacredness of marriage. There are impediments to persons marrying, in addition to relationship by blood and by marriage. One is called spiritual relationship. It connects persons baptized with the baptizer and with the sponsors, forbidding marriage between those so related. In order that all should know who were so related the baptismal book was necessary, as the marriage book was necessary in order that all should know who were married. The Council was not thinking of the concerns of genealogists. Its only interest was the sacredness of marriage. Its decrees, however, lighten the load of those interested in ancestors of the last 400 years. Those who would trace their family tree to Charlemagne or Brian Boru have a harder task.

What then is the present status of parish records? The Code of Canon Law prescribes that parish priests must enter in the baptismal book the names of those baptized; the minister of baptism; the parents; and the sponsors, together with the time and place of baptism *sedulo et sine ulla mora,* carefully and with no delay. There is no requirement to record date of birth. The purpose is to record spiritual relationships which preclude marriage. Still, among the thousands of records of infants' baptisms that I have ex-

amined no more than a hundred lack the date of birth. Since most children receive baptism within a few days of birth, the omission of the birthday is no great drawback to the genealogist. In cases of converts baptised as adults the records usually show only the approximate age.

In ecclestiastical transactions women are usually known by their maiden names. Hence the maiden name of the child's mother usually occurs in the record. Still, I have been surprised to find many records in which only the father's family name appears. A peculiarity of the records of the Old Cathedral in Vincennes is the addition of a nickname to the accepted family name. Sometimes the older name gave way to the nickname. Thus, the baptismal record of the first native of Vincennes to become a priest shows his father to have been "Antoine Petit dit Lalamiere." Yet the priest was always known as Lalumiere. Perhaps it was to preserve a memory of the original family name that he retained "Petit" or the initial "P" in his signature. His first name also illustrates another practice. His godfather was Simon Gonzalez, a Spanish trader, who seems to have been a close friend of the Petits, and I have no doubt that the boy was named in his honor. Sometimes the record shows the sponsor to be related to the child baptized as uncle or aunt or grandparent or even brother or sister. Such identification can be of value to the historian or the genealogist. One should pay close attention to the names of the sponsors, since these are nearly always relatives or close friends of the family.

The Latin in which many records have been written should be no obstacle in interpreting them. "John" becomes "Ioannes," "James" becomes "Iacobus." There may be some difficulty with girls' names; the girl may have been called Helen or Ellen or Ella or Nell; in the baptismal register she is "Helena." Not all the old registers are in Latin, however, and it might be less confusing if they were. For the diversity of languages and of scripts is the source of greater difficulty than the uniform Latin.

The efforts of priests of one language to write the names of parishioners who speak another may lead to confusion. Thus I have been told that the record of a child whose name was Sweeney appears in the baptismal book as "Schwienie." French names and German names have presented challenges to Irish priests. And some priests appear to have exhibited idiosyncrasies of their own. Thus all the girls having names derived from "Helena" appear in some records as "Eleanora."

One law concerning baptismal records will be of great service to future genealogists. It is now required that when a person is confirmed, married, ordained, or makes vows in a religious order, this event is to be recorded in the entry of his baptism. It is evident that this provision has the same purpose as the older laws: to safeguard the sacredness of marriage. For when a person intending to marry has his baptismal certificate sent to the priest of the parish where he wishes to marry it will show whether he has previously married or received orders or entered a religious order. Such notations would be of help to the genealogist, but they are not present in the entries made before this law came into effect.

The confirmation register is also a recent addition to the books the parish priest is obliged to keep. Not many of the parishes had such records before the turn of the century. Even the more recent registers of confirmation would be more helpful if they conformed to the regulations of the Canon Law, which require that the names of the sponsors and of the parents of those confirmed should be entered. Most of those I have seen contain only the list of those confirmed and the name of the minister of confirmation. An instance of the lack of care in compiling such lists that sometimes occurs is my own experience in preparing for ordination. There was no trouble about the baptismal certificate, but the church had no record of my confirmation, and I was obliged to testify that I had received the sacrament.

Next to the records of baptism those of marriages are of most importance in genealogical research. The Code of Canon law prescribes that as soon as possible after the marriage the parish should enter in the marriage book the names of those married and of the witnesses. It is to be noted that this is the duty of the parish priest even though another has witnessed the marriage. I should say that this rule is as scrupulously observed as the one concerning baptisms. Sometimes the local bishop requires a more detailed account than the Code lays down. In the records of the Old Cathedral one finds the names of the principals' parents and the birth place of the bride and groom, but I have not met with such full records elsewhere. Nontheless, I believe that anyone requesting a record should ask for a complete copy of the entry.

All that was said before about the names of the sponsors in baptism has relevance here concerning the witnesses at marriages. Their presence is as necessary for the validity of the marriage as that of the priest. Usually they are relatives or close friends of those entering marriage; hence their names may provide clues for future inquiries. Of course, the remarks concerning variations of spelling in baptismal records are equally applicable to records of marriage.

Strange to say, the entries in the book of the dead are very meager. The Code of Canon Law directs that these should contain not only the time and place of burial and the name of the deceased, but also his age and the names of his parents or spouse and the name of the priest who administered the sacraments to him. But the records generally give only the name of the deceased and the day of the funeral.

The fifth of the parish books is that of the condition of souls, which would be a sort of census. It is my impression that the information is generally entered on filing cards, which are thrown away with the departure of the families whose names are on the cards. If such a book or such a collection of cards is available, it would surely be a source of valuable information.

What should I say about the availability of these records? For the most part parish priests readily respond to reasonable requests for information, though there are differences among them. Even among archivists there is diversity. An archivist of a large archdiocese wrote in answer to my request for suggestions: "I'm afraid that historians and genealogists are on different wave lengths...And it is unbelievable how many people bother us about family trees. It's all quite boring, at least to me." One parish priest whom I consulted told me that he has so many requests that he has employed a lady in the parish to search for records, paying her an hourly wage and passing on this cost to the inquirer. Another said that he would be glad if the inquirer enclosed a stamped envelope with his request.

Perhaps the critical point is that the request should be reasonable. One priest who wrote to me from Canada told me that the situation there is

as it is here: the records are not in the diocesan archives but in the respective parishes. He also said that most priests are ready to furnish records if the requests are reasonable. He went on to say that most inquiries coming from this country are so lacking in precision and completeness that they try the priests' patience. It is important, that in making an inquiry one should supply all the data that one possesses.

Other sources of information are parish histories. Most of these fall far short of perfection as histories. They concentrate on the succession of parish priests and the erection of buildings and installation of statues. Still they do often give lists of members of societies and of committees, which could contain the name of someone in whom the inquirer is interested. The archives of the archdiocese of Indianapolis has many such histories and so do the Indiana Historical Society, the Indiana State Library, and the large depositories such as that at Notre Dame.

The archives of religious orders and congregations contain information about the members. For some years I have been helping two cousins, one on my mother's side and one on my father's, who have been delving into genealogy. Not long ago I learned the name of one of my grandmother's brothers from the order to which my mother's cousins belonged. It was the father of these sisters whose name was preserved in the community archives. I was thus able to fill one of the gaps for my cousin.

There are compilations of parish records that cover considerable areas and can be useful for the genealogist whose ancestors lived in those areas. I mention three:

Charles E. Nolan, *A Southern Catholic Heritage,* Volume I, *Colonial Period, 1704-1813,* [New Orleans, Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1976.]

This work describes all the records in the parishes in the ecclesiastical province of New Orleans, embracing the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. A second volume is projected.

Catholic Church Records of the Pacific Northwest, translated by Mikell De Lores Wormell Warner. [St. Paul, Oregon, French Prairie Press, 1972.]

These records cover the period from 1838 to 1848, made by the missionaries who worked there. I understand that it is available to any college or historical society for one dollar from Mrs. Selby Santmyers, 9284 Golondrina

Drive, LaMesa, California, 92041.

Dictionnaire Nationale des Canadiens Francais, [3 volumes, Montreal, Institut Genealogique Drouin, 1965.]

If the genealogist knew a little more history, his task would be lighter; if he understood the conditions of his ancestors; how people lived and worked and prayed and courted and died; how they cooperated and quarreled with one another; he would be in a better position to know what manner of men they were. Genealogists and historians ought to learn from each other.

Moreover the two groups have a common interest in the documents of the past--in their preservation and in their publication. Both can gain from such books as I have mentioned.

There is a certain hesitancy among ecclesiastical authorities to make records public. The Code of Canon Law provides that documents of both parochial and diocesan archives are free for inspection to those having a genuine interest in them, and that such persons are to receive a faithful copy of them at their own expense. Exception is made of the secret archives, but these are only diocesan, not parochial, and are limited to a few cases. As interest in genealogy increases I believe that the clergy will make access to the records easier. In addition, two or three years ago the United States Catholic Conference issued a pamphlet on archives, encouraging the bishops to appoint archivists and to organize their archives.

In conclusion, may I remind inquirers that the parish books are not always indexed and not always legible; that parish priests have many other duties besides looking up records; and that their patience is not unlimited. If you are making an inquiry, provide all the information you already possess as precisely as you can and it will not take a miracle to receive an answer.